

Acceptance of *Prajñā* Thought in Chinese Buddhism

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At the time Buddhism was introduced to China, Confucianism (儒教) and Taoism (道教) were already very influential in Chinese social and cultural life. But Buddhist thought presented a new and difficult challenge in understanding for the Chinese scholars because of the essential differences in language construction between the Chinese and Indian Sanskrit languages, and so they sought a familiar 'filter' as an aid to understanding the Buddhist sutras.

In this regard, early on Neo-Taoism (老莊思想) played a significant role in aiding interpretation of the Indian Buddhist texts, as it was through the Neo-Taoist viewpoint that the Chinese were initially able to begin to understand Indian Buddhism, although the Neo-Taoist view was not sufficient to support accurate interpretation of the sūtras. Terms such as Nothingness (無), wrongly interpreted by the Chinese as a synonym for Śūnyatā (空), were borrowed from Neo-Taoist thought in order to understand the Buddhist Prajñā (般若) thought. However, when later it became clear that there were serious defects in these early translations, especially in regard to the concept of Śūnyatā, the understanding of

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which was largely based on Neo-Taoist thought, these Neo-Taoist terms were removed and replaced with more accurate translations.

Among Chinese Buddhist scholars at that time, the monk, Sengzhao (僧肇) was regarded as most skillful in both understanding and interpreting Śūnyatā thought, so that through his gifted translations Chinese Buddhists were finally able to understand the Buddhist sūtras.

Key words: Neo-Taoism, Nothingness, Prajñā Thought, Śūnyatā, Sengzhao.

I. Introduction

For hundreds of years, from the Later Han dynasty (後漢) to the Eastern Chin dynasty (東晉), Confucianism was in a period of decline and the intellectuals were seeking a way of spiritual life through Taoism. At this time, Taoism integrated with Confucianism into a new thought known as *Xuanxue* (玄學) which was flourishing. At the same time Buddhism was flourishing also and becoming established in Chinese society along with other new currents in Chinese thought. However, it was *Prajñā* thought which was the leading light during this period.

In order to understand Chinese Buddhist thought it is necessary to investigate it in association with other forms and characteristics of traditional Chinese thought. The means we will use to do this will be to examine the process of acceptance of early *Prajñā* thought in China.

Our investigation will concentrate firstly, on translation of Buddhist terms, giving consideration to cultural differences between the original Buddhist texts and the early Chinese translations; secondly, we will consider the reasons why the Neo-Taoism was flourishing as the social milieu at the time but was also concerned with facilitating the spread of Buddhism. And finally, we will focus on the reasons why the Neo-Taoist term, “Nothingness” was used to interpret ‘Śūnyatā’ in Prajñā thought. The vehicle for our investigation is a comparative study of Śūnyatā and “Nothingness.”

II. Translation of the *Prajñā Sūtra*

It is fair to say that Chinese Buddhism had always taken an independent stance to the Buddhism from India, although essentially it has always remained faithful to the original Indian teachings. But philosophically the Chinese already had strong cultural identity and as the Chinese language is very different from Indian Sanskrit, direct and literal translation of Buddhist texts was not possible so that it was necessary for the Chinese Buddhists to rely on philosophical understanding rather than language per se.¹ From the very early times when Indian Buddhism was first becoming known in China cultural relations were established on the basis of Neo-Taoist philosophical discourse which is evident in the Chinese translations of the *sūtras*. This is why the Neo-Taoist term *Xuanxue* was at first adopted as there was no precedence to highlight their mistake. Because of this fundamental error of choosing the term *Xuanxue* the Chinese rendered a quite different interpretation of the *sūtra*. Here, we will consider how the problems of translation impacted on the attitudes and understanding of Chinese Buddhism in relation to the original Indian Buddhism.

This problem has been identified by scholars in relation to texts such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā sūtra*. When we compare the Sanskrit text with the two Chinese versions we see that the term *tathatā* (眞如) is translated as “nothingness by nature (本無)” (Tokiwa 1938: 173).

In both the *Daohangbanruojing* (道行般若經) translated by Lokaṣema (支婁迦讖) and the *Damingdujing* (大明度經) translated by Zhiqian (支謙) *tathatā* is translated as “Nothingness by nature,” and the chapter 14 title in both versions translates the Sanskrit term, “*tathatāparivarta*” as “Nothingness by nature” (*Daohangbanruojing*: T.8.449c-500a; *Damingdujing*: T.8.491c).

So why was this term Nothingness by nature chosen as the accepted translation of *tathatā*? Firstly, the Chinese understandably interpreted *tathatā*

¹ Chinese is a semantic language and the form of a word in Chinese is not changed, by and large it is a monosyllable. On the other hand, Indian language is characterized by its frequent changes in the form of a word and a polysyllable. Moreover, Chinese grammar in early days was not systematic but Sanskrit already had a completed system of its grammar (Wright 1980: 44).

as “Nothingness” because of the prevailing influence of this *Geyifojiao* (格義佛教) thought which was flourishing at the time. *Geyifojiao* is based on the idea that two different things can essentially have similarities (Kimura 1976: 630). Yet what was the specific idea that led them to interpret Nothingness from *tathatā*?

Dr. Tsukamoto mentions that Kumārjīva (鳩摩羅什) of the Later Qin dynasty (後秦), in his translation of the *Prajñā sūtras* (般若經) rendered *tathatā* as “Great Suchness (大如),” while Shihu (施護) of the Northern Sung dynasty (北宋) translated it as “True Suchness”; Lokaṣema in the Later Han dynasty and Zhiqian in the Wu (吳) dynasty on the other hand, interpreted it as “Nothingness by nature.” Dr. Tsukamoto further points out that the latter two monks’ translations were presumably influenced by Laozi (老子) which says “all phenomena are derived from existence (有) and nothingness (無)” (1955: 115).

The *tathatā* of the *Prajñā sūtras* is prefaced on *Śūnyatā* and means “True Nature as *Śūnyatā*.” Therefore, it is presumed the Chinese who translated *tathatā* as “Nothingness by nature,” essentially intended “nothingness,” to imply negation of the truthfulness of phenomena (Fukunaga and Matsumura 1983: 258). Thus, the scholars translating *sūtras* selected the term, “Nothingness by nature” because the Chinese would not have understood the meaning of the *Sanskrit* term, *tathatā*, if it had been translated as “Suchness (如)” in accordance with its original *Sanskrit* meaning. The term “Nothingness by nature” can also be found in the treatise, *Laoizhu* (老子注) written by Wang Bi (王弼) (Mori 1982: 872). It is only in *Foshuowuliangshoujing* (佛說無量壽經: abbreviated as *Wuliangshoujing* 無量壽經) translated by Kang Sengkai (康僧鎧), that the term, “Suchness” occurs for the first time.² In the *Fangguangbanruojing* (放光般若經) *tathatā* is translated as “Suchness” or “Exact Suchness (如如),” even though “Suchness by nature” is used as the chapter title in the *sūtra* (T.8.15b; 89c; 112b). In the introduction of the *Daohang banruojing*, Daoan (道安) translated *tathatā* as “True Suchness” although it was translated as “Nothingness by nature” in the

2 從如來生 解法如如 (T.12.274a).

sūtra (T.55.47a). Daoan's understanding was that "Nothingness by nature" was actually the subject of the *sūtra* on "True Suchness." The term "True Suchness" in Chinese is grammatically only an adverb. In Daoan's understanding of *tathatā*, "Nothingness by nature" was the same as "Suchness"³ which was the main subject of *Fanguangbanruojing*.

As mentioned earlier, Chinese Buddhist understanding was originally founded on interpretations of the Indian scriptures through the lens of Chinese thought. It was not until the latter period of the Later Han dynasty that the *Prajñā sūtras* were actually translated for the first time. But this period when *Prajñā* thought was flourishing in China was after the period of the Eastern Jin dynasty, coinciding with the spread of *Xuanxue* and the popularity of Qingtan (清談).

III. The Prevailing Social Milieu and Acceptance of Prajñā Thought

1. Flourishing of Neo-Laozi Thought

For 400 years under the Han dynasty (漢), Confucianism held dominance in political and cultural arenas in China and was regarded as the ideal, in that the society and the people were stabilized and cultivated through Confucian influence and thought. The reason why Buddhism was able to gain a foothold in China in the early period of the Later Han dynasty was in the state of underground activities for 200 years that the intellectuals of the time were biased towards politics and not much interested in religion.

At the time of the Six Dynasties (六朝), after the Later Han dynasty, the intellectuals started to express interest in cultural ideas such as philosophy, the arts, literature and religion. An area of particular interest to the intellectuals was the Neo-Laozi thought typified in the example of "the seven Wise Men in the Bamboo Forest (竹林七賢)." They engaged in what was known then as "Qingtan or Pure Discussion," speculating about the nature of

3 For details, see Kaginushi (1968: 29-36).

life and discussing personal and social issues. Although superficially the word Qingtan means ‘pure discussion which is not defiled by worldly things,’ the Neo-Laozi thought was also embodied in the notion of “Pure Discussion.” So this was the climate in which the intellectuals endeavored to understand *Prajñā* thought and *Śūnyatā*, from the viewpoint of “Nothingness.”

In order to investigate similarities and variances between the two terms, *Śūnyatā* and “Nothingness” we will begin by examining the meaning of “Nothingness,” which it might be noted, is the most significant term in Neo-Laozi thought. “*Tao* (道)” is the most crucial term in Laozi thought borne out by the fact that the founder of the Taoist school, Laozi, was also known as “*Tao*” (Ito 1988: 25). Over the centuries this term, *Tao*, has had a profound influence on Chinese thought. In Laozi thought *Tao* means “Nothingness,” as in Laozi’s statement “it is not the *Tao* that is effable.” Laozi thinks that because the term, *Tao* is not a concrete object we cannot see or touch it, and that is the reason why *Tao* is Nothingness. But here the term, “Nothingness” as used by Laozi is not used as a technical term, it is understood in the grammatical sense as an infinitive. The conceptual use of the term, “Nothingness” occurs in the text, *Laozi* as follows:

All phenomena are derived from existence, and existence from “Nothingness.”⁴

What things in existence are beneficial, it is because “Nothingness” is applied to it.⁵

“Nothingness” here means the origin from which all phenomena are produced. It also has the meaning of the possibility to produce all phenomena. So if “Nothingness” can be defined as indefiniteness, then “Nothingness” is “*Tao*” itself. This latter definition indicates the actual function of “Nothingness” such as in the example of a dish or cup which should have space available for functional use; or a room say, where there is

4 天下萬物生于有，有生于“無” (*Laozi*: Chapter 40).

5 有之以爲利，“無”之以爲用 (*Laozi*: Chapter 20).

potentially empty space for occupation. So functionally speaking, “Nothingness” should be of benefit to people. “*Tao*” explains it as follows:

“*Tao*” produces one, and the one, two.
Two produces three, and three, all phenomena.⁶

Here, it is explicit that all phenomena are derived from “*Tao*.” Therefore, “Nothingness” according to Laozi thought has the nature of substantialism and the theory of generation (Hachiya 1982: 648).

It should be mentioned here that Laozi’s “Nothingness” is not Nothingness in the sense of absolutism, rather, it is “Nothingness” as the negation of existence.

Laozi insists that we have to return to the state of origin from which all phenomena are derived, while Zhuangzi (莊子) asserts that the “*Tao*” emerges from the state free from worldliness in the real world. Furthermore, even though Zhuangzi is a philosophical descendant of Laozi, he directs his interest to the inner object, whereas in the idea of “Non-Intent” Laozi speculates the “*Tao*” from the perspective of outer object. Here we find a similarity between Zhuangzi’s thought and Buddhism which was why Zhuangzi’s ideas were able to provide a bridge for the spread of Buddhism in China. Hence, it’s not surprising that the Taoist idea of “Nothingness” had a significant influence on the acceptance of Buddhism in China at that time. And this naturally leads to inquiring into what role the philosophy of “Nothingness” played in acceptance of the Buddhist *Śūnyatā* thought.

2. *Śūnyatā* in *Prajñā* Thought

Śūnyatā is explained briefly as meaning that all phenomena are dependently originated and therefore, are not substantial and are non-existent. But within the relative nature of “Dependent Origination,” all phenomena are indeed existent, simply as their phenomenal nature—as what they are. The philosophical thought of “Nothingness” has been deeply rooted in the Chinese

6 道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物 (Laozi: Chapter 42).

mind since the time of Laozi and Zhuangzi, and it is said that this idea is strongly representative of the Chinese character which is intuitive and experiential.

In order to compare the ideas of Indian *Śūnyatā* and the Chinese “Nothingness” we must investigate the most significant and essential aspects of the two philosophical traditions (Hachiya 1982: 645). It is believed that the first *Mahāyāna sūtra* to be introduced to China was the *Prajñā sūtra*, and the manner in which it was introduced and spread across China is a key to better understanding the history of Chinese Buddhism.

In the second section, **Translation of the *Prajñā Sūtra***, we saw that the terms, “True Suchness” and *Śūnyatā* were introduced by Lokāśema and Zhiqian, who translated the *Prajñā sūtras* through their interpretation of the Taoist term, “Nothingness by nature.” This approach whereby Buddhism is understood through concepts and terms specific to other systems of thought, is called “*Geyi*” and the Buddhism which was flourishing at the time is known as “*Geyifojiao*” (Tang 1991: 235).

The term, “*Geyi*” appears for the first time in *Zhufayachuan* (竺法雅傳: T.50.347a) of the *Gaodengchuan* (高僧傳). The Buddhist movement “*Geyifojiao*” started in the period of the Eastern Jin dynasty, but it should be understood that this manner of endeavoring to understand Buddhism by way of other systems of thought was common long before the Eastern Jin dynasty period. For instance, we can find other examples of this in terms such as *Nirvāṇa* (涅槃) which was translated as “No Intent,” or *tathatā*, which was translated as “the Nothingness by nature,” and *Arahat* (阿羅漢), translated as “True Person (真人).”

It is hardly surprising that Neo-Taoist thought initially had a strong influence on the Chinese understanding of Buddhist *sūtras* as we know that key concepts in the original translations were taken directly from Neo-Taoism. Zhufaya (竺法雅) who was the leading figure in *Geyifojiao* Buddhism at that time, was erudite in Buddhist doctrine and Chinese literature and among his students were the children of bureaucrats and intellectuals. As they were not familiar with the Buddhist philosophy, Zhufaya and Kang Falang (康法朗) of

Zhong Mountain taught them by means of the way which categories of Buddhist concepts to make them understand were changed into another name of “*Shishu* (事數)” (Chang 1996: 119-137). While Kang Falang is regarded as the pioneer of Buddhism in China, it is Daoan who is considered the main figures in Chinese Buddhism. Zhufaya studied under the supervision of Fotucheng (佛圖澄: 232-348 CE) and later wrote books and lectured. But he also insisted that interpreting Buddhism through Chinese thought was not an appropriate method and that the *Geyifojiao* way of understanding should be abandoned in order to penetrate to the true Buddhism. Zhufaya also believed that interpreting Buddhism through *Geyi* had always been inadequate because of its potential to distort the original meanings of the Buddhist *sūtras*. On the basis of this opinion he criticized *Geyi*, insisting that the Buddhist *sūtras* should be translated only through the viewpoint of Buddhism, as the established basis of Chinese Buddhism. However, he did not intend to sever relations with traditional Chinese thought and he even used Taoist terms in his own study and when writing commentaries to the Buddhist *sūtras*; in this regard, he himself was also complicit in *Geyifojio* (Tsukamoto 1968: 297). As mentioned earlier, *Geyi* refers to Indian Buddhist thought interpreted through Chinese thought, whereas early Chinese Buddhism is *Geyifojio*, and the Three Schools all offer typical examples of this in their interpretations. In this sense, any criticism of *Geyifojio* should be understood as an attempt to understand the overall meaning of Buddhism from a scholarly perspective.

3. Proliferation of studies on the *Prajñā sūtras*

During the period of the Wei and Jin dynasties (魏晉) when the Neo-Taoism was flourishing, studies on the *Prajñā sūtras* were also proliferating due to the prevailing climate of thought at that time, although study of the *Pañcaviṃśati sāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā* (小品般若) and the *Aṣṭaśāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā* (大品般若) were not so popular then there was great interest in some parts of the *Prajñā sūtras*. *Daohangbanruojing* was the first part to be translated by Lokāṣema along with the *Damingdujing* translated

by Zhiqian; later *Guangzhanjing* (光讚經), a version of the *Pañcaviṃśati sāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā* was translated, but the study did not thrive. The *Fangguangbanruojing* version did however flourish, and this was sent from Khotan by Zhu Shixing (朱士行).

Here, we get a glimpse of Master Daoan's great passion for the *Prajñā sūtras*. It was in the later period of Master Daoan's life that studies of the *Prajñā sūtras* reached their culmination. But still in at those days, studies of the *Prajñā sūtras* were approached through the Neo-Taoist perspective as we noted earlier. That is, the Chinese *sūtras* which were translated from the Indian Buddhist texts were spread among the circle of intellectuals as Chinese thought rather than Buddhist texts reflecting the Indian view. But because Master Daoan did not agree with this way of studying the *Prajñā sūtras* he tried to understand *Śūnyatā* through a comparative study of different versions of the *Prajñā sūtras*. His efforts bore fruit in his disciple, Sengzhao (384-414 CE) who was also a disciple of Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什). Thus, for the first time, *Śūnyatā* in *Prajñā* thought was correctly translated and transmitted in Chinese Buddhism. understood.

IV. Views on interpreting *Śūnyatā* in *Prajñā* Thought

What is the early understanding of *Prajñā* thought in the historical context? The Three Schools' interpretation held that "mind as *Śūnyatā* is Nothingness," where "*Śūnyatā* is based on the material," and "*Śūnyatā* is nothingness by nature." This idea was later refuted by Sengzhao in his treatise, "Discussion on the *Non Absolute Emptiness* (不真空論)," Sengzhao does not name the Three schools but he criticizes their arguments. This is why today we investigate the Three Schools and their arguments through these later materials (Ancho: T.65.93a).

The scholars who first insisted on "mind as *Śūnyatā* is Nothingness" are mentioned as Zhi Mindu (支愍度) and Zhufawen (竺法溫).⁷

⁷ It is said that Zhi Mindu is the first to present the meaning of "mind is Nothingness by nature"

This view, “mind as *Śūnyatā* is Nothingness” insists that enlightened wisdom itself, is Emptiness or Nothingness, by which we can comprehend all phenomena. This is based on the Zhuangzi idea concerning “one who has reached the highest state of mind (至人).” In the following, Sengzhao cites from his work, *Zhaolun* (肇論):

“Mind is nothingness” infers that we are not fettered by all phenomena as all phenomena are not nothingness. The advantage of this perspective is that it calms our mind, but the disadvantage is that it may lead to the conclusion that all phenomena are nothing (T.45.152a).

Sengzhao is critical of this view *because* it does not comprehend the non-substantiality of all phenomena. In other words, it is right in its view of non-fettered mind as the ideal but it does not examine the essential nature of phenomena (Ocho 1960).

Another view rejected by Sengzhao is that “*Śūnyatā* is substance” (T.45.152a). This implies that *Śūnyatā* can be substance because it is not substantial in itself, in other words, *Śūnyatā* does not mean “free from material” but with material, or *Śūnyatā* of non-substantiality. In this sense, the new view is a more advanced interpretation of *Śūnyatā* than the previous view, “mind is Nothingness.”

However, although the position of the two schools, supports the view of “*Śūnyatā* as substance,” Jizang (吉藏) explains that Sengzhao shows that the Chinese view of “*Śūnyatā* as substance” and the view of Zhi Mindu are equivalent to the view of “*Śūnyatā* by nature” (T.42.29a).

The earliest definition of “Nothingness by nature” also appears in Sengzhao’s treatise, “Discussion of the Non-True *Śūnyatā* (不真空論)” as follows:

The people who revere the view of “Nothingness by nature” always refer to “Nothingness.” But if you negate “Existence,” it becomes the “Nothingness” and if you negate “Nothingness,” it

becomes itself (T.45.152a).

Sengzhao negates the two concepts, “Existence” and “Nothingness” and coins the phrase “Nothingness” beyond the two concepts (Fukunaga and Matsumura 1983: 280).

He then criticizes the view of “Nothingness by nature” because “Non-Nothingness (非無)” is not true “Existence” and it is also not true “Nothingness.” He counsels that these views are not correct understanding of “Non-Existence (非有)” and “Non-Nothingness.” Thus, it could be said that “Non-Existence” is not “True Existence” and “Non-Nothingness” is not “True Nothingness.”

V. Conclusion

In this paper we have examined the acceptance and understanding of *Prajñā* thought in early Chinese Buddhism. After the introduction of Buddhism in China it was the intellectual circle who earnestly began to accept Buddhism during the time of the Jin dynasty (晉), but the political and social situation at that time was highly unstable as it the barbarian dynasties were ousting the Chinese dynasty from China’s Midlands.

Acceptance of the Buddhism in this period was significantly related to this social unrest as in the wake of an unstable society, *Śūnyatā* thought was seen as an ally to help pacify the people. So the significant area of study for Chinese Buddhist scholars in those days was to understand *Śūnyatā* thought.

It is not surprising that when they translated the Buddhist *sūtras* which had a different structure of language from the Sanskrit, that they endeavored to interpret the texts through their existing knowledge and conceptual understanding.

A typical example of interpretation of *Śūnyatā* by the Three Schools is as follows:

Firstly, in the view, “mind is nothingness,” *Śūnyatā* is interpreted as the

function of the subject of understanding while the existence of phenomena is not negated. Secondly, in the view of “*Śūnyatā* is based on the material,” *Śūnyatā* is regarded as “Non-Substantiality”; this view is the ontological interpretation of phenomena. Thirdly, the view, “*Śūnyatā* is Nothingness by nature,” attempted to negate the relative concepts of Existence and Nothingness but did not transcend the limitations of Nothingness.

Among various interpretations of *Śūnyatā*, Sengzhao’s criticism is regarded as the most distinguished and he is regarded as the one who correctly understood *Śūnyatā* in *Prajñā* thought. However, Sengzhao merely exemplifies the “Three Interpretations” in order to explain his view of *Śūnyatā* in his treatise, “Discussion of the Non-True *Śūnyatā*.” This leads to a need for further research in the future in order to review the thoroughness of Sengzhao’s examination regarding prior theories of *Prajñā* thought.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, C=Chinese, S=Sanskrit)

Aṣṭaahasrikā prajñāpāramitā sūtra (S) 小品般若經

Damingdujing (C) 大明度經

Daoan (C) 道安

Daohanbanruojing (C) 道行般若經

Fanguangbanruojing (C) 放光般若經

Fotucheng (C) 佛圖澄

Foshuowuliangshoujing (C) 佛說無量壽經

Gaosengchuan (C) 高僧傳

Geyifojiao (C) 格義佛教

Guangzanbanruojing (C) 光讚般若經

Jizang (C) 吉藏

Kang Falang (C) 康法朗

Kang Sengkai (C) 康僧鎧

Kumārajīva (S), Jiumoluoshen (C) 鳩摩羅什

Laozi (C) 老子

- Laozizhu* (C) 老子注
 Lokaṣema (S), Zhiloujiachan (C) 支婁迦讖
 Mahāyāna sūtra (S) 大乘經典
 Nirvāṇa (S) 涅槃
Pañcaviṃśati sāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā sūtra (S) 大品般若經
Prajñā Sūtra (S), *Banruojing* (C) 般若經
 Prajñā Thought (S) 般若思想
 Qin (C) 秦
 Qingtan (C) 清談
 Sengzhao (C) 僧肇
 Shihu (C) 施護
 Shishu (C) 事數
 Śūnyatā (S) 空性
 Tao (C) 道
 Tathatā (S) 真如
Tathatāparivarta (S) 本無品
 Wang Bi (C) 王弼
 Xuanxue (C) 玄學
Zhaolun (C) 肇論
 Zhi Mindu (C) 支愍度
 Zhiqian (C) 支謙
 Zhongshan (C) 中山
 Zhufawen (C) 竺法溫
 Zhufahu (C) 竺法護
 Zhufaya (C) 竺法雅
 Zhu Shixing (C) 朱士行
 Zhuangzi (C) 莊子
Zhufayachuan (C) 竺法雅傳

Abbreviation

- T *Taisho shinshu daizokyo* (大正新修大藏經: *Japanese Edition of the Buddhist Canon*), Ed. by Takakasu, Junjiro, et al (高楠順次郎). Tokyo: Taisho Issaikyo Kankokai, 1924-1935.

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